Education, Print and Writing

The activities of missionaries, private societies and a few individuals prepared the ground for those who advocated the promotion of education as a part of the duty of the British Government (Jha 1985: 21). This helped untouchables and lower castes in gaining entry into schools and acquiring education (Bharti 1992: 4). The British government also took note of their poor socio-cultural condition and, in order to alleviate the position of the lower castes, it prepared a list of backward and oppressed castes in 1934. In the same year, it passed the second India Act, which provided special benefits to untouchable castes and tribal communities. It was after the passing of this Act that there was a significant improvement in the condition of these communities. They were given the opportunity to read and write and were given reservation not only in jobs but also in politics. After 1936 there was an even greater improvement in their condition. It was at this time that Baba Saheb Ambedkar formed the Scheduled Caste Federation and, in July 1945, declared that the government had agreed to his demand for a separate state for the people belonging to SCs and STs who were scattered across the country (Ram 2004: 45).

Acquiring education and trying to integrate the Dalits in the mainstream was not, however, smooth sailing. Public schools were virtually closed to the Chamars (Briggs 1920: 237–38). Both teachers and pupils made it difficult for the lower castes to sit in classrooms. The lower castes, as a result, were not found in any significant number in the schools. But despite the stiff opposition and social constraints disfavouring the educational achievements of the untouchables and backwards, the number of untouchables successful in obtaining education in the United Provinces (the former name of UP) alone was 46,000 in the year 1917 (ibid.: 230). As mentioned in the earlier subsection, this section of educated Dalits attempted to reread history and analyse it from a different perspective. The coming of the print media further effectuated the articulation of their voices of dissent, along with the popularization of a different framework and a new analysis to understand the process of history. Contestations between various ideologies were evident in the literature published since the 1960s in India. The Dalits challenged the Brahminical hegemonic order by utilizing the print media; they further used it to counter the value framework erected by the dominant power groups. In other words, the print media was being utilized by this section to subvert the ideological and cultural structure persisting since ancient times. It helped in injecting new confidence and enthusiasm and enabling greater

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mobilizational power. Moreover, the writings of the ruling class were always full of spaces, which could be exploited by the Dalits to counterpose their own ideologies. Further, the print medium gave cultural self expression to such groups through the efforts of the organic intellectuals of the community. This was understood by visionaries like Swami Achhutananda and the future Dalits followed rigorously the tradition that had been laid down by him.

It is noteworthy that certain Dalit castes that are yet to get entry into the written world have also not entered the discourse of political representational power. For the castes that have written records, it was the link with the written tradition that had been the turning point in their history of protest against social and cultural discrimination. But for every caste that had acquired political empowerment by associating with the print medium, there were many others who had not yet acquired the assertiveness to become a part of the democratic process of the country. These were the highly marginalized castes like the Chhipi (dyer), Mali (gardener), Badhai (carpenter), Lohar (ironsmith), Kumhar (potter), Nai (barber), Rangrej (dyer), Julaha (weaver), Dafali (community which sing songs at marriage ceremonies), Chikwa (butcher) and many other small communities. No organic leadership has emerged from within these communities and they have been languishing on the fringes without access to any of the rights that other assertive castes have enjoyed. It is not a coincidence that none of these castes has any written history or caste legend about its origin. They also do not have popular booklets written by people of their own community linking their caste with the nationalist narrative.

One caste which exemplifies how a written caste history can be an instrument in raising self-esteem and confidence among the caste members and can also help in their democratic participation is the Jogi caste, which also did not have a written caste history for many years. The Jogi caste is an extremely backward Muslim community whose caste-based profession is begging. This caste is mainly concentrated in the districts of UP like Faizabad, Pratapgarh, Jaunpur, Sultanpur and Banaras and constitutes nearly 40 per cent of the total Muslim population. Despite its large number, it remained deprived of all the benefits of development for a long period of time. The literacy rate of this caste was less than 1 per cent. This caste was looked down upon by all other castes since it followed its traditional profession of begging. Neither the government nor the elders of this community were concerned about the plight of these people. When the people of this caste went to government officials to claim some benefits provided to SCs they were turned away saying that Muslims did not

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fall within the definition of SCs. Their pleas fell on deaf ears till the only organic intellectual of the community, Dr Moharram Ali, took the initiative of linking this caste with the Dalit movement led by the BSP. The first thing that he did was to collect the caste history of the Jogis from the older members. He then wrote a booklet narrating its caste glory and disseminated it among the illiterate Jogis to raise their self-esteem. When the other castes heard about the past glory of the Jogis they too felt impressed. This elevated the pride of the Jogis, built up their self confidence and helped in their identity assertion. This identity assertion was crucial for political mobilization and development. The history of the Jogis reveals that they were earlier a Hindu marginalized lower caste called Gosai. A roving saint (*jogi*) of this caste converted to Islam and the present day Jogis are his descendants. The *jogi* from whom the Jogi caste claims its lineage, could perform miracles. This made him very popular among the people who gave him alms as reward. His descendants continued to follow this profession, which eventually became the caste-based profession of the Jogis. This story was narrated by Dr Ali at all Jogi caste meetings or *sabha*s so as to transform the listeners into political entities. He then linked them with the BSP by claiming their Dalit origin, which he felt would be more effective for their uplift than their Muslim identity. The caste members claim that although they are Muslims by religion, culturally they are Hindus. Today, the Jogis have acquired the confidence to stand for elections for the post of Gram Pradhan in their villages and some have even won them (Bharti 1997: 71–72)

Construction of Narrative Types

The small newspapers and the local initiatives to develop a print culture among the Dalits were helpful in the creation of a reading and writing public. The versions, opinions and interpretations communicated through these newspapers and popular booklets percolated down to the common people and were translated during the oral discourse of activists and social leaders. The method through which the Dalits learn about their own past is referred to as *parh-likh ke*. Even the illiterate people say that they became aware of the suffering and oppression imposed on them by the dominant section through *parh-likh ke*. It is noteworthy that, to provide legitimacy to their personal experiences, they sometimes propose that they had acquired knowledge by *parh-likh ke*. The processes of construction, transmission and percolation of certain ideology-directed knowledge

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about their identity is revealed by Dalits living in Shahabpur, a village near Allahabad, during the narration of their histories and through the narratives of the suffering and the oppression that they have faced for the last fifty years.[4]

While discussing the history of the Chamars, Pyarelal, aged seventy-six years, living in Godampatti, Shahabpur, narrated,

> My name is Pyarelal. I would like to tell you about the history and the past of the Chamars. Earlier, long grass reeds used for sweeping the ground (*Jhakhars*) were tied around our feet to clean the ground on which we walked. But in case a few footprints got left behind, the upper castes would walk down the road only after the wind or an animal had cleared them away. When the children of our caste went to school, they were made to sit on the ground while the upper castes sat on mats. When they drank water they were cautioned not to touch the pot (*lota*) or it would become polluted.

Pyarelal went on to narrate the story of the origin of the Chamars.

> Earlier Brahmins and Chamars were real brothers (*sagey bhai*). Once Rishi Ashtavakra (whose body had eight distortions), went to the house of the Brahmins for a religious ceremony in which a cow was to be donated to God (*godaan*). Ashtavakra was given a cow as a gift but he refused saying that he would not take anything. At this, some of the Brahmins started deriding both him and his distorted body. This angered the Rishi who cursed the Brahmins who were laughing at him, saying that since they were laughing at the 'bones and flesh' (*haar-maans*) of a person, they would have to work with *haar-maans* all their lives. These Brahmins then became Chamars whose caste-based profession is to skin dead animals and remove their bones.[5]

When Pyarelal was asked how he knew all these things he replied '*parh-likh ke*', although he was totally illiterate. It appears that knowledge about both the experiential past and the mythical past of the Chamars had been acquired by *parh-likh ke*.

In Godampatti, which is inhabited mainly by Chamars, the memory of an oppressive past has created a strong sense of identity and caste pride among them. This pride is also visible among the women as is evident from the narrative of an old Chamar woman called Jhuria who vividly described the oppression that she suffered when she was young and had worked in the Raja's (landlord of that region) house as a servant. When she, along with the other women, would go to the Raja's bungalow, the Rani and the other members of the household would not look at her face while talking to her. While grinding wheat and *makara* on the grindmill

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(*janta*), a painstaking and laborious job, they were made to tie pieces of cloth around their feet so that their sweat did not fall into the flour. Bells (*jhanjhar*) were also tied around their feet to warn people of their arrival. After a hard day's work they were given 1.25 kg (*paanch pau*) of cheap cereals like *jau* or *matar*. They were not given any money or any of the produce of the gardens and fields of the Raja. When asked whether all this had happened to her or whether she had heard about them, Jhuria said that while these had happened to her, she also learnt about this through *parh-likh ke*. She herself was illiterate but her husband and children and other villagers had shared their knowledge with Jhuria and the rest of the women.[6] From her narrative it was evident that the type of narrative that is created in the Dalit printed form is transmitted at the grass-roots level, including women, through oral communication by Dalit leaders and activists.

Another semi-literate, forty-year-old man called Bhullar, who also belonged to the Chamar caste living in the Godampatti, said that earlier, when the Chamars would want to acquire knowledge, their tongues would be cut off by the upper castes who told them that the job of the lower castes was only to serve them. On being asked how he knew this, he said that he had read it in a book. To authenticate his point he showed me a popular Dalit booklet which narrated the story of Shambook, a lower-caste character in the *Ramayana* who had been killed by Lord Rama for reading and spreading knowledge of the *Veda*s. Bhullar added that despite the ban on acquiring knowledge, the Chamars developed their own *Veda*s called *Chamar Veda*s. According to him the Brahmins and the Chamars were the only two castes that had their own *Veda*s. It is interesting to note that among the upper castes a common form of insult to a Chamar who talks too much is 'What *Chamarved* are you chanting' (*kya Chamarved bak raha hai*). It appears that this sarcasm has been subverted by the Chamars by claiming that they have their own *Veda*s like the Brahmins. On being asked how he knew about the *Chamar Veda* he replied,

> We have all studied. We have all read books. We spend time in the company of *sadhus*. We go to political rallies and caste meetings (*Sabha Samaj*). We buy books from there. We read plenty of books. All this is written in books. A member of the BSP, Lalji Premi, visits our village often and distributes books and pamphlets among us.[7]

From Bhullar's statement, it is very clear how knowledge has permeated through semi-literate people like Bhullar to illiterate people like Jhuria and Pyarelal. The meaning of *parh-likh ke*, as it is used by illiterate

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people, emerges from the narratives of the persons mentioned earlier. The knowledge acquired by the semi-literates is transmitted and disseminated orally to the illiterate section as secondary knowledge, which then becomes first-hand knowledge for the latter. They can then confidently claim that they have learnt about the history of their people and their caste through the *kitab* (printed literature). His narrative reveals certain patterns. It creates homogeneity in popular Dalit mentality by destroying autonomy of thinking and imagination, and it also becomes the basis for the creation of unity and solidarity among Dalit communities.

The network developed by the print medium is very clear. It transmits experiential knowledge about individuals as well as the community and its collective past, which is available as popular and almost homogeneous narratives to the common Dalit population. Here the term *parh-likh ke* also contains knowledge acquired from oral communication. This becomes clear from Bhullar's statements that knowledge is also acquired in *sabha samaj* (Dalit political meetings), interactions with the more educated community leaders and from *sadhu*s or wise persons (*gyani purush*). Thus, this modern printed knowledge coexists with the traditional oral knowledge of the communities. Bhullar said that the new consciousness among the Dalits in society is only because of the contributions of Kabir, Ravi Das and Ambedkar. Associating themselves with Kabir and Ravidas helped them to acquire an image of a community with its own values, norms, rituals and culture. This lent them prestige in society and helped them to overcome the stigma of being an unclean caste. Ambedkar inspired them to be educated, which led them to acquire social prestige and emancipation from untouchability. According to Bhullar, people of the upper castes today, do not mind sitting with the Dalits and drinking tea with them only because the Dalits have been liberated to a great extent, from social stigma. Bhullar became emotional while talking about Kabir, Ravi Das and Ambedkar, saying that his only dream in life was to see the statues of these three great persons installed in his village.[8]

RECONSTRUCTION OF MYTHS

When a certain myth, legend or narrative is converted into print, many a time its dissenting nature is sharpened. This is because the writers who compose them are aware about the issues faced by the readers and they try to highlight these issues in the printed form. In one form of writing they try to extend the myths in such a manner that their dissent

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against the hegemony of the dominant sections is brought out more forcefully, while in another form they try to subvert the existing meaning of the myth and interpret it as a reaction against Brahminical norms. The dissenting nature of these myths then acquires the potential of being used as instruments for raising political awareness among the population at the grass-roots level.

An example of an epical myth that has been extended in Dalit narrative can be seen in the case of the Bhangis. The educated Bhangis link themselves to the Brahmin school of thought by claiming to belong to the same lineage as Balmiki, the composer of the epic, *Ramayana*. Since he was a Brahmin, they too, consequently, are Brahmins. Books like *Main Bhangi Hoon*[9] and *Balmiki-Balmiki* (Balmikanand 1974) were written by Bhangis with the objective of educating their community about their caste stories and caste heroes. The books claim that the Mughals wanted to convert the Bhangis into Muslims, but when they protested they were declared outcastes and forced to do dirty jobs like sweeping and cleaning, which they still continue to do. Later, with the rise of the Dalit movement in UP, the intellectuals among them tried to establish Balmiki as a *Shudra* and as a result the Bhangis too were *Shudra*s. But one section, inspired by Ambedkar, deconstructed the myth of Balmiki by questioning how a *guru* of the Bhangis could have killed other Shudras (Balmiki was a dacoit called Ratnakar before his transformation into a rishi). They also questioned how a person who was grief-stricken on seeing a bird in the throes of death (described in the *Ramayana*), could kill other people. Despite these arguments, most Bhangis still continue to claim Balmiki as their caste *guru*. Their argument is that in Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas*, which is the version read by the upper castes, the killing of the lower-caste character, Shambook, by Lord Rama has been wilfully omitted whereas Balmiki mentions it in his ver-sion since he himself belonged to a lower caste.[10]

Balmiki's *Ramayana* projects Shambook as a great saint born into a lower caste. He used to meditate on the banks of the Godavari in Dandakaranya and preach to the lower-caste people. Lord Rama's kingdom was, once, struck by a famine. Saint Vashistha told Rama that the cause of the famine was Shambook, a lower-caste person, who has been reading the *Veda*s and imparting its message to other lower castes. Therefore, Shambook had to be killed to save the famine-stricken people. Rama was not prepared to do this heinous act, but on the advice of Vashishtha and other saints, he, with his brother Laxman, reached Shambook's ashram. Shambook on seeing Rama and Laxmana coming proceeded to

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welcome them. Rama told the saint that he had broken the laws of Brahminism and hence had to be killed. Shambook replied that he had not committed any crime but had preached to people the lessons of devotion. Rama then said that the crime that Shambook had committed was greater than all other crimes, since the people of the lower castes were not entitled to Vedic knowledge as their work was only to serve the people of higher castes. So saying, Rama killed the great saint.

An old Chamar man, while narrating this story, identified Shambook with his own caste. He traced the origin of the caste to Gunishaiv, Shambook's father who belonged to the same caste.[11] The earliest mention of the story of Shambook in the written tradition of Dalits is in the book *Ram Rajya Nyay (Natak): Shambook-Muni Balidan* written by Swami Achhutananda around 1946 (published in 1950). But before that the story was popular in the oral tradition of the Shahabad district area in Bihar, as is evident from an unpublished manuscript named *Nirghina Ram Ka Ramayana*.[12] Other popular booklets like Anantaram Akela's *Shambook Rishi Ki Barahmasi*, which is a long poem, also narrate these stories.[13] Under the influence of Brahminical norms, the story was narrated in such a way so as to show that Shambook had been cursed by the gods that he would enter heaven only if he were killed by Lord Rama. That is why the events described in the *Ramayana* occurred in such a way that Lord Rama killed Shambook and ensured him a place in heaven.[14] But the increasing popularity of these booklets, along with increasing Dalit consciousness and the spread of BSP politics in UP, gave a new direction to its narration. The Dalit communities now raised Shambook to the level of a martyr with the aim of imparting education among Dalits, in the same part of UP that had seen a different interpretation earlier.[15] While Shambook, in Balmiki's *Ramayana*, was eager to go to heaven, contemporary Dalit narratives, written by politically aware writers and activists, adapted it according to their contemporary socio-political requirements. Their narrative is tailored to highlight the oppressive character of Brahminical religion, the corollary of which was the marginalization of the lower castes by depriving them of education, since the importance of education as an instrument for upward mobility had already been realized by them. The story of Shambook is an example of how an epical myth of the value-loaded, Brahminical religious and cultural text is reinterpreted and used in contemporary Dalit politics to homogenize all the lower castes through the creation of a common metanarrative highlighting the injustice of the upper castes.

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The story of Eklavya is another tale from the epics that is reinterpreted and extended by the Dalits in their publications. This story is a part of the *Mahabharata*, the second epic popular among upper-caste Hindus. In the original story, Eklavya was an excellent archer whom Guru Dronacharya, the teacher of the Kaurava and Pandava princes, refused to accept as his student because of his low birth. Eklavya then went to the forest and learnt archery on his own by patiently practicing before a clay statue of Dronacharya which he had himself sculpted. On one occassion, when Dronacharya came to the forest with his students, his best pupil, Arjun, was defeated by Eklavya in a shooting competition. When asked to name his teacher, Eklavya politely mentioned the name of Dronacharya. The teacher, seeing Arjun's fame as the best marksman in the world being usurped by a lower-caste boy, asked Eklavya to cut off his thumb and give it to him as his *Guru Dakshina* (gift to the Guru).

This is the story found in the version of the *Mahabharata* mostly read by the upper castes. The orality which had evolved under the influence of Brahminical hegemony, which had earlier been circulated among the lower caste communities too, narrated this story with a strong emphasis on Eklavya's sacrifice for his guru. He readily agreed to cut off his thumb under the command of his teacher despite the injustice of the teacher in asking him to do so. His patience in practicing archery before a clay statue is also highly glorified in the Brahminical version.[16] However, today the Dalits, under the influence of the BSP, emphasize the fact that his thumb was cut off due to the conspiracy of the upper castes, who did not want their superior position to be threatened by a lower caste.[17] They also link the story with their urge to acquire education by reiterating that the upper castes do not want the lower castes to progress through literacy. Thus, like the story of Shambook, the Dalit interpretation of the myth of Eklavya has been reinterpreted and renarrated in their print media in a way that suits their socio-political requirements.

From these reconstructions of myths, it is evident that there is a strong tendency among the Dalits to link their myths with Brahminical myths, but the attempt is to give them an alternative reading which may also be regarded as replication in the form of dissent rather than as part of the process of Sanskritization.[18] The contradictions inherent in this process can also be perceived as in the case of the Bhangis, who, on the one hand claim to be the descendants of the Brahmin, Balmiki, while on the other, under the influence of the Ambedkarite ideology they project him as a Shudra and try to prove that Dalits too had wise men in their communities.

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The Ambedkarite influence, which is visible in the critique of the story of Balmiki, is also visible in the other myths that are linked to Brahminical epical narratives, the stories of Shambook and Eklavya being examples. After the rise in Dalit consciousness, these two stories were recreated and renarrated to suit the needs of the new Dalit politics and then printed in popular booklets. When these were disseminated among the Dalits at the grass-roots level like Bhullar and Jhuria, a new orality developed that suited the political logic of the BSP.

These reconstructed myths that are printed in Dalit popular booklets also help in the creation of a new political orality that provide the political leaders a language of discourse. Dalit leaders like Kanshi Ram and Mayawati use these stories in their speeches and discussions with common people and activists of the Dalit movement. These booklets have played a motivating role in the making of Mayawati's intellect too. They have helped her to gain information about the history of the Dalits, the present situation of the poor and oppressed, the life stories of different Dalit leaders, their views on the issues facing the people and their solutions to the same. This literature is the fountainhead of the intellectual prowess that is evident in her speeches and debates and, later, in her political addresses during election campaigns (Yad 2005b: 4).

When Kanshi Ram began his political career in Pune in the early 1970s by moblizing the Dalits of that region, D.K. Khaparde, an associate, provided him a large number of Dalit booklets that helped him understand the real issues facing the Dalits. In particular, Ambedkar's 'Annihilation of Caste,' which had been circulated among common people in the form of cheap popular booklets, helped Kanshi Ram to concretize his language, logic and issues, which further helped him while presenting his ideas at seminars and discussions. He himself bought a large number of booklets to read and gain insight into the Dalit psyche. This also helped him to plan his future course of action in terms of developing the political language to address the Dalits at the grass-roots level (ibid.: 11). Activists and local politicians also rely on these booklets for formulating their political language so as to communicate with the grass roots and bring them under the influence of the BSP movement.

In the next chapter we will see how the Dalit heroes, who have evolved through popular literature, are given a visual image in the form of pictures and statues to further impact on the illiterate Dalits, and also how they become visual resources in contemporary Dalit politics.

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Notes

1. 'Imagining Identities: A Catalogue of Dalit Heroes', Allahabad: Dalit Resource Centre: 13.
2. Ram Baran, village Shivpuri, recorded on 7 August 2001.
3. Analysis of booklets collected by Dalit Resource Center.
4. See the project report, 'Imagining Past: Memory, History and Development', G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad, 2003.
5. Pyarelal, Godampatti, Shahabpur', recorded on 8 February 2003.
6. Field diary, 'Women of Shahabpur', under project *Imagining Past: Memory, History and Development*, G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad, 2003.
7. Bhullar, Godampatti, Shahabpur, recorded on 8 February 2003.
8. Same as Note 7.
9. Das, B. *Main Bhangi Hoon*, as quoted in K. Nath 2000.
10. Interview with Bauddhacharya S. Rao Sajeevan Nath, Dalit writer, on 21 March 2005.
11. Interview of Siyadin, a Chamar by caste, on 1 March 1995 at Gajipur, UP.
12. Nirghina Ram's 'Ramayana' is an unpublished manuscript written by a Dalit of Janaidih village of the Arrah District in Bihar in 1920. I got this manuscript from Sita Ram Pustakalaya, Janaidih.
13. Anantaram Akela, *Shambook Rishi ki Barahmasi* (a long poem), published from Kauriyaganj and other such publications brought out by Dalit authors.
14. Same as note 11.
15. Interview with Rampal, Gajipur, UP, on 4 May 2004.
16. Interview with Ramnath, Shringverpur, Allahabad, on 6 March 2002.
17. *Jai Jai Bhim Mahaan* and other pamphlets published on the occasion of *Veer Eklavya Pratima Anavaran Samaroh* at Allahabad on 20 April 1997.
18. See Karanth 2004 for further details on replication as dissent.

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Chapter 3

Visuals, Cultural Performances and Myths

Now our music is not merely for entertainment but is an instrument in our fight for liberation. We are creating our own narratives and establishing our own heroes.

Suman Kumar, Dalit folk actor, Banaras, 20 October 2005.

Folk paintings, wall paintings, sculptures made of terracotta and clay, and cultural performances specific to each Dalit caste like the *Chamraundha* of the Chamars, *Pasiauwa* of the Pasis, *Dhobiauwa* of the Dhobis and so on, have always been part of the cultural resources of Dalits. These cultural forms reflect the socio-economic environment in which they exist and provide them with sustenance. Before the rise of Dalit consciousness, however, none of the lower castes had any visual representation of gods since there was no concept of a temple in a fixed place or form in the absence of an organized religion (Ilaiah 1996: 187). For them, gods and goddesses take all forms and shapes in a variety of places based on their daily interaction with nature, quite unlike the upper castes whose gods remain in temples somewhat alienated from real life (ibid.: 180). Further, they did not have any visual images of heroes since their heroes emerge from real life situations (ibid.: 179). Each lower caste had its own heroes who were revered in their oral tradition through ballads and narratives without having any visual form. Thus, the heroes and gods as also the cultural performances remained a part of the cultural resources of the lower castes, rather than being transformed into political resources. With the rise of Dalit political consciousness in UP and the emergence of the BSP, which has been using cultural resources for the political mobilization of the Dalits, the heroes of each caste are being converted into political resources by acquiring visual representation in forms that allow the illiterate and semi-literate Dalits at the grass-roots

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level to easily visualize and then internalize them as symbols of their identity. In addition, these visual resources, which have taken the form of pictures on calendars, booklets, posters, statues, memorials and so on, are themselves helping to form myths and the memories accompanying these myths. Through the process of dissemination, these have now entered into their orality and collective memory in new forms and with new interpretations. As is well known the visual medium has a great impact not only because it is a vehicle for representation but also because it has the ability to inscribe itself on the memory of people. The BSP exploited this fully well. In its political strategies it created a cyclical relationship between myths, memories and visual resources to arouse the sense of caste pride and glory within the Dalits.

While searching for heroes, the first thing that the BSP intellectuals did was explore their narratives for local heroes who could fit into their logic. The next job was to give a face to these heroes. Sometimes the image appeared from the description of the hero within the narrative itself, but often they needed to create an image that would fit into the description when no photograph or other visual source was available. In the recent past, statues of Dalit heroes like Udadevi, Jhalkaribai, Suhaldev and Bijli Pasi have been installed in many roadside crossings all over UP. Pictures of heroes like Ambedkar, Kabir, Ravidas, Jhalkaribai, Udadevi and so on are also put up on the walls of Dalit houses in the form of posters or calendars. Like the upper-caste Hindus, some Hindu Dalits also hang up pictures of Hindu gods like *Ganesha*, *Hanuman*, *Durga* and so on. Buddhist Dalits have pictures or idols of Buddha in their houses. It is a noteworthy fact that calendars, posters with the images of Dalit heroes are found mainly in the houses of people living in cities or small towns.[1] In villages, pictures of Dalit heroes from their local myths are distributed free of cost during political rallies in the form of leaflets, pamphlets, handbills and so on. These are usually printed by local Dalit businessmen for politicians standing for elections from that constituency as part of their election campaign.[2]

Creation of Images

The image of Udadevi, which can now be seen all over UP, is not very old. It was created in 1953 when the National Botanical Research Institute (NBRI), Lucknow, developed a museum based on the city history of Lucknow. A painter was invited who was asked to create an image based

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on the description of Udadevi in the narratives collected by Professor K.N. Kaul, a botanist working with the Birbal Sahni Institute. In 1973, a Swatantrata Sangram Samiti, was formed which made a cement statue based on this image in the NBRI museum. The statue was not made very well and soon started cracking. Unskilled labourers were called in to fill in the cracks but in this process the image got distorted. Later when the BSP wanted to build her statues and print her portrait in posters and calendars they picked up this distorted image. That is why the statue in NBRI grossly differs from the roadside statues (Saroj 1997: 7).

Suhaldev is another icon of the Pasi caste popular in central UP. The first image of Maharaja Suhaldev was created in 1950 in Jittora near Bahraich in north UP by the local Congressmen. The Congress had organized a rally in Jittora to inaugurate a memorial of Suhaldev. Two local painters, Lalit Nag and Rajkumar Nag, were commissioned to paint the first picture of Suhaldev from their imagination. Later, Samaydeen of Gonda sculpted a statue of Suhaldev based on the painting made by the Nag painters, in which he was portrayed like a soldier astride a horse. This clay statue was later replaced by a cement one.[3] The local Raja of Prayagpur donated 500 *bigha*s of land and the Jittora Lake to the Suhaldev Smarak Samiti. Earlier the statue was placed in the park in the form of a memorial. Today however the place has been renovated to resemble a temple with the statue as the idol. Many people from near and far visit it to offer prayers. A priest has been appointed to conduct the prayers. Along with prayers, the devotees also take dips in the Jittora Lake, which is believed to have medicinal properties that can cure incurable diseases especially leprosy. They believe that the blessings of Maharaja Suhaldev have endowed the waters with these magical properties. More than the Dalits, in particular, the Pasis with whom Suhaldev was earlier identified, it is the upper castes who visit his shrine because of their belief in his magical powers.[4] He has now been transformed into a god and his myth is used more by the BJP and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) for mobilizing the upper-caste Hindus of that region against Muslims than by the BSP for the mobilization of Dalits, although the BSP does sometimes mention the name of Suhaldev as a hero while mobilizing the Pasis. The RSS has installed Suhaldev's statue in Lucknow but this statue is markedly different from the one in Jittora that had been installed in the 1950s based on the painting by the Nag brothers. In the Lucknow statue, Suhaldev is shown as a valiant, military leader similar to the image of Maharana Pratap. He is wearing an iron armour, headgear, breeches, a shield in one hand with a sword tucked in his waist. On the other hand,

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the statue in Bahraich depicts Suhaldev more as a medieval folk hero wearing a crown and holding a bow and arrow.[5] Maharana Pratap is an upper-caste historical character propagated by the RSS and the attempt to carve Suhaldev in the Rana's image might be a reflection of their desire to homogenize the militant Hindu heroes and their iconographies. The residents of Bahraich, however, believe that the statue of Suhaldev in their town is the true depiction.[6]

Maharaja Bijli Pasi, a Pasi king who was supposed to have ruled over some regions of UP in the medieval period, holds an important place in the Pasi caste history. He is a symbol of caste glory for all the Dalits, proving that some of the lower castes were also kings. The ruins of his fort from where he ruled are still present in Lucknow, which has been converted into a memorial by the BSP. His victory day is celebrated there every year with great pomp and show for which a rally is organized where people from all Dalit communities congregate and cultural performances infused with political meaning are held before them. A statue of Bijli Pasi has been installed there in the image of a brave medieval warrior holding a bow and arrow. The story behind the creation of this image of Bijli Pasi is an interesting one. It was narrated by Nasimuddin Sidiqui, a former minister in the Mayawati government and close associate of Kanshi Ram. He said that when Kanshi Ram wanted the statue to be installed, he asked the sculptors to put together the best features of five of the Sikh gurus also revered by the Dalits, like Guru Arjun Dev, Guru Govind Singh, Guru Nanak and so on. If one were to observe the statue of Bijli Pasi carefully one can identify these features.[7] This image of Maharaja Bijli Pasi is also printed in calendars and posters, which shows him standing amidst the splendid ruins of his fort. Many Dalit houses, especially Pasi households, adorn their walls with it. R.K. Choudhry, one time minister in the BSP led government and presently in the SP, was the first to get this image of Bijli Pasi printed.

Installing statues of Dr B.R.Ambedkar in various places in UP was one of the most significant activities of the Dalit movement. A survey of the Azamgarh region of UP revealed that the installation of these statues is a matter of great pride for all the Dalit communities of the region that has gone a long way in constructing their identity.[8] Ram Sharan Ram, a Dalit youth living in that region, said that whenever a statue of Ambedkar is installed and garlanded on his birth anniversary, the chests of all the Dalits of that region swell up with pride.[9] An inspection of the statues of Ambedkar between Allahabad and Azamgarh showed that most of them have been copied from his picture in the Constitution of India, which

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has since been reproduced in textbooks and calendars. In the villages that were surveyed, for example, Kotwa, Chauka Khurd, Bankat Bazaar and Belisa, it was found that most statues were made by local artistes, and hence, of poor workmanship. Despite this, there is homogeneity and the colour schemes are almost identical, the coat being navy blue and the trousers being white. The statues were installed by local, mostly Dalit, villagers with the financial and political help of local BSP MLAs (Members of Legislative Assembly) or MPs (Members of Parliament). The crossing in Azamatgarh in the district of Azamgarh, where a statue of Ambedkar was installed with the financial help of Barkhuram Barma, the local BSP MLA, is now known as Ambedkar Chauraha (crossing). Another statue at Jangopur village in Azamgarh was financially supported by Malik Masood, the BSP MLA of this area. A third statue at Kajara Mor near Jaunpur district was erected with the financial help of the village pradhan belonging to the BSP.[10]

What do these statues mean for Dalit communities and their political mobilizers? First, the visual mode is highly effective for creating memories since images impact immediately. This, along with the narratives around these statues, helps in creating memories among the Dalit communities of the great symbols of dalit politics. Second, it enables communities to gain self-respect since this is a sign of their acceptance in society. It elevates their sense of identity, self-esteem and self-respect with the reflected glory of the heroes. Gaining self-respect in public space acts an antidote to their everyday humiliation that they face at the hands of the upper castes at the grass-roots level. The statues installed by Mayawati carry a special meaning for the Dalit communities. When they enter the Ambedkar Park, where the statue of Dr Ambedkar is installed, they do so with the feeling that they have a right to the place. They use it like their own house, whether it is to sit, sleep or walk. They assert their right by saying that '*Bahanji* has constructed it' (*Bahanji banwaile hai*).[11]

It has often been alleged by anti-BSP forces, mainly the SP, that the installation of statues is an attempt to capture government land. This has led to conflict and violence whenever the Dalits try to put up a statue. At many places in Azamgarh the police has imposed an undeclared ban on the installation of statues of Dalit heroes, especially of Ambedkar, for this reason. The Thakurs or the upper-caste landowners and the middle-caste Yadavs of that region, who owe their allegience to the ruling SP, allege that the installation of the statues of Ambedkar by the Chamars and Pasis is a deliberate attempt to grab land. Omkar Singh, a fifty-year-old Thakur living in village Majhauwa of Azamgarh district, whose family

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owns most of the land of that village, said heatedly that all the upper castes felt greatly angered when they saw the statues of Ambedkar and emphasized that they would not be responsible if they lost control and resorted to bloodshed.[12] Ram Nagina Yadav, another influential man of the village, teaching in the local primary school, who belongs to the Yadav community and supports the SP, voiced his skepticism about how installing statues of Ambedkar all over the place would help in the socio-economic development of the lower castes. Instead, he said that they anger the other castes and lead to rivalry, tension and violence in the village.[13] After the defeat of the BSP in UP in 2004 and the coming of the SP, the number of statues of Ambedkar has considerably decreased. The sculptors of Azamgarh also mention that, earlier, policemen bought statues of Ambedkar to replace any damaged ones in order to prevent any untoward incident from taking place between the members of the two parties who might blame each other for the breakage.[14] Thus the statue of Ambedkar, which is a constituent element in the identity construction of the Dalits, has also hurt the sentiments of the other castes living in that region. This has often led to violence and bloodshed as in 2002 when the Thakurs of village Majhauwa fired gunshots during the birth anniversary celebrations of Dr Ambedkar organized by the local BSP leaders.[15] During the reign of the BSP, when the installation of statues was a common event, such incidents occurred very frequently in different regions of UP.[16] In the erection of these statues, Mayawati, however, as has been mentioned earlier, saw the assertion of Dalit identity, which is why the construction of memorials and the installation of these statues was given top priority in the BSP's political strategy.

The BSP's Myth Making of Ambedkar and the Local Heroes of UP

The mapping of the process of myth making of Ambedkar in UP is an interesting one. Ambedkar was highly popular among the people of Maharashtra. As the maker of the Constitution of India he also gained popularity among the rest of the Indians, but in UP he was not as well known in the initial period of his active life. His name was popularized by Swami Achhutananda while he was involved in the Adi Hindu movement with which Ambedkar had a close association. The Poona Pact of 1932, one of whose signatories was Swami Achhutananda, further consolidated their friendship. That Ambedkar respected Swami Achhutananda is evident from the fact that he opened or closed his letters to the latter

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with the word *Pranam* (a word to show highest regard in North India).[17] Ambedkar was also a close associate of Hari Prasad Tamta, the editor of *Samta*, a newspaper published from Almora during the colonial period. Thus, Ambedkar's fame spread in this region both orally through the discussions Tamta had about him with his friends and through print by the newspaper *Samta*, which regularly published Ambedkar's writings. Also, the educated Dalits of North India who were readers of newspapers had read about Ambedkar's role in the Poona Pact. These people began to subscribe to Dalit newspapers published from Maharashtra, which contained the writings of Ambedkar. In this manner they became aware of his opinions and writings and he thus gained reputation in this region (Bechain 1997: 145).

After independence, the RPI, which had been founded by Dr Ambedkar in Maharashtra, was expanded in UP. With the spread of the political discourse of the party, the myth of Ambedkar became a part of the collective psyche of the people. The image of Ambedkar that was carved in the mind of the common Dalit was one of a super human (*maha manav*), the messiah of the Dalits, and the one who would lead them towards enlightenment through education and development. The politics of the RPI began from western UP and extended towards Kanpur and its adjoining regions. Agra had started emerging as a hub for Dalit politics and Ambedkar addressed a rally here on 18 March 1956 which was attended by thousands of educated Dalits. Through such meetings, Ambedkar's fame further spread in the region. Initially, his photograph was popularized through posters and pamphlets published and distributed by the RPI for disseminating information about forthcoming meetings. The image was that of a suited and booted, westernized gentleman holding a copy of the Constitution in one hand. This image appeared to the common Dalits as a symbol of awareness through education and the fight for a better future. It also helped deconstruct the stereotypical notion of Dalits as being oppressed, suppressed and illiterate.[18]

After Dr Ambedkar's death his photographs were published in calendars and posters and his statue was erected. His photographs were also published on the covers of Dalit magazines, newspapers and booklets. This image reached the common and illiterate Dalits. When they heard his mythical eulogies in everyday political discours and occasional speeches, his image as a saviour and the architect of Indian democracy began to get ingrained in their minds. In some places he was referred to as an incarnation of the Buddha while in other places he was hailed as being more knowledgeable than the upper castes.[19]

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When the BSP came within the political fray in UP in the mid-1980s, there were very few statues of Ambedkar in the state. The only ones that had been installed were by the government and semi-political and social organizations. After the launching of the BSP and its strategy of aggressive identity assertion, Ambedkar became a symbol of Dalit identity. His statues began to be installed by Dalit politicians and activists in various places in UP. But since Dr Ambedkar was not well known among the Dalits at the grass-roots level in this region unlike in Maharashtra where he is a household name, this image was thrust upon the people through the process of political dissemination. In the first phase of the BSP, before it understood the peculiar society and culture of UP in which saints, seers, epical heroes and local heroes occupy an important space in the minds of the people, both upper-caste and lower-caste, it tried to mobilize Dalits using the Ambedkarite language which was dominated by the consideration of social and economic factors (Narayan 2001: 144). In the latter phase, when the BSP truly understood its people, it had to change its political language from that of Ambedkar, like in the case of Maharashtrian Dalit movement, to one that was interspersed with the cultural symbols of the people of this region. Thus, its political strategy included putting up statues of local cultural heroes, saints and also of Dr Ambedkar, and organizing celebrations around their memories in the regions where they are popular so as to install them as important myths in their collective memory. In this strategy, Ambedkar and the local cultural heroes of this region were projected as being complementary to each other rather than as binary opposites. Table 3.1 shows the local heroes popular in different places of UP that were used by the BSP as symbols of Dalit identity.

As can be seen from Table 3.1, the BSP selected myths that were popular in particular regions to mobilize the people of that region. The myths are not merely small anecdotes or incidents about lesser known characters but long texts about persons who played significant roles in history and whose life stories could be used as inspirations to motivate and mobilize the communities concerned. The narratives selected were such that they facilitated the creation of visual texts and ignited the imagination of the viewers. The myths being used by the BSP for mobilizing Dalit communities were influential because of the urge of the communities themselves to gain self-respect and relocate their place in society. The myths thus serve as visual resources for political mobilization which the BSP is using most effectively.

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Table 3.1
Subaltern myths identified for memorialization

	Name	*Caste*	*Region*	*District*
1.	Chhaur	Yadav	Baghelkhand	Rewa, Satna (MP)
2.	Jhalkaribai	Kori	Bundelkhand	Jhansi, Hamirpur, Lalitpur and Banda
3.	Bijli Maharaj	Pasi	Avadh	Lucknow, Bahraich, Barabanki, Jaunpur and Allahabad
4.	Daldev Maharaj	Pasi	Purvanchal	Rae Bareli, Jaunpur and Allahabad
5.	Baaledeen	Pasi	Purvanchal and Avadh	Kausambi and Allahabad
6.	Mahamaya	Buddhist	Purvanchal	Varanasi, Ghazipur, Ballia, Basti and Deoria
7.	Ravidas	Chamar	Purvanchal	Varanasi, Jaunpur, Allahabad and Azamgarh
8.	Vira Pasi	Pasi	Avadh	Pratapgarh, Sultanpur and Allahabad
9.	Udadevi	Pasi	Avadh and Central UP	Allahabad, Pratapgarh and Sultanpur

Source: Compiled from *Jansatta*, 28 July 1997 and other sources.

BARDS, CULTURAL SQUADS AND THE TRANSMISSION OF MYTHS

Various methods are used for transmitting these myths at the grass-roots level. Among them is the use of bards for composing ballads and roving through villages singing them aloud. This is similar to that found among high castes where professional singers called *charan* and *bhaants* narrate the caste glory of each caste through songs and dances (Narayan 2002: 161). In UP, the Pasmangta is a subgroup of the Dalit Pasi caste whose profession is to go to the doors of each Pasi family singing stories taken from their caste history. In their songs about a Pasi hero, the bards succeed in creating a link between the Pasis and these heroes. In return each family donates offerings like rice, turmeric and other objects for consumption. These professional minstrels are however not found among all Dalit castes but only in those castes that claim to be martial communities and erstwhile rulers. With growing education and urbanization this profession is slowly dying out but the songs and ballads composed by them are still part of the oral tradition of these communities and are now being used for identify assertion and political mobilization. One such song narrating the glory of the Pasi caste is as follows:

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Shri ram have raj pasi
Vir pasi, dheer pasi
Biveki aur gambhir pasi
Bijli pasi ke vansh pasi

(Translated)

(Like Shri Ram are the Raj Pasis
Brave Pasis, firm Pasis
Intelligent and steady Pasis
The descendants of Bijli Pasi are the Pasis)[20]

Today *pasmangta geet* (song) has become a generic term for the songs sung by bards among the Dalits. These songs are now used by the BSP to transmit the glory of various castes so as to arouse their caste pride and help construct their identities. The old bards of specific Dalit communities, folk singers, political poets and singers deployed by the BSP for this purpose form part of the Cultural Squad (*Jagriti Dasta*). This squad consists of writers, playwrights, poets, artists and so on, whose job is to write songs, ballads, poems, plays and paint pictures about Dalit consciousness and transmit these messages to the villages through the various cultural performances of that region (Singh 1994: 122). Often they pick up the folk songs and ballads popular in particular regions and rewrite them with words carrying political nuances that will evoke the people at the grass roots. These cultural performances narrate the glory of Dalit icons like Ambedkar, Phule, Mayawati, Kanshi Ram, Jhalkaribai, Udadevi, Bijli Pasi, Avantibai, Mahaviridevi and so on (ibid.: 1–2). These stories, poems and so on are also printed in popular booklets, which the people buy and read at their leisure. The lead singer of the Cultural Squad in Allahabad, Babulal Bhanwra says that when Mayawati (of the BSP) was standing for elections, they used to often perform dramas and musical folk plays (*nautanki*s) based on the lives of female heroes so as to help the audience associate them with Mayawati. In addition they also sing songs written by Dalit poets like Ramesh Chandra Baudh and A.R. Akela. Babulal Bhanwra himself has composed many songs in folk song genres like *kajari*, *biraha*, *doha*, *chaupai*, *chaubela*, *kawwali* and so on through which the singers could transmit the messages of the BSP (see Figure 3.1). A song composed by him in the *pasmangta* genre to arouse the sense of identity among the Dalits at the grass roots is as follows:

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Figure 3.1
Photograph of an election meeting of the BSP in Bundelkhand where R.N. Suman, a Dalit singer, sings the glory of Jhalkaribai

Source: Dalit Resource Centre, G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad.

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Bir Dalit dheer Dalit
Buddhiman evam gambhir Dalit
Desh khatir bhaile kurban ho Dalit veeron

(Translated)

(Brave Dalit steady Dalit
Intelligent and firm Dalit
Sacrificing themselves for the country)[21]

Pyarelal, another member of the Cultural Squad of Allahabad said that the squad also screens documentaries on the life of Ambedkar, a film on Dalit heroes produced by NDTV (a TV channel), and Hindi films like *Damul* produced by a famous director Prakash Jha that shows atrocities on Dalits by upper castes, in villages and districts. They also play and sell audio cassettes containing speeches of Kanshi Ram and Mayawati at rallies and political meetings just before the speeches of the local BSP leaders.[22]

Another effective mode for transmitting the political messages of the BSP is the Cycle Squad (*Cycle Dasta*) in which groups of party workers ride cycles across villages and towns shouting slogans. They stop at short intervals to communicate their messages to the people by linking them with the myths of that region (Singh 1994: 1–2) by songs and speeches delivered in the storytelling manner. Organizing functions, rallies and meetings commemorating the birth or death anniversary of Dalit heroes is also a forum for transmitting the political messages of BSP. During her three tenures as chief minister, Mayawati organized numerous functions to inaugurate statues of saints and other great persons revered by Dalits. Various exhibitions were also organized highlighting their achievements, to make the people aware of their glory and self-respect. Through such functions and exhibitions, the myths and caste stories around these heroes reached the Dalits. Kanshi Ram believed that one of the methods for empowering the Dalits is to link them with their genealogies, and caste myths are important means of doing so (ibid.: 14). That is why the mobilizational language of the BSP is heavily loaded with myths and caste legends of the Dalit communities. Repeated evocation of the memory of local and national personalities of these castes helps to consolidate the identity of the depressed castes and subcastes so as to enable them to be effective entities in caste-based competitive politics.

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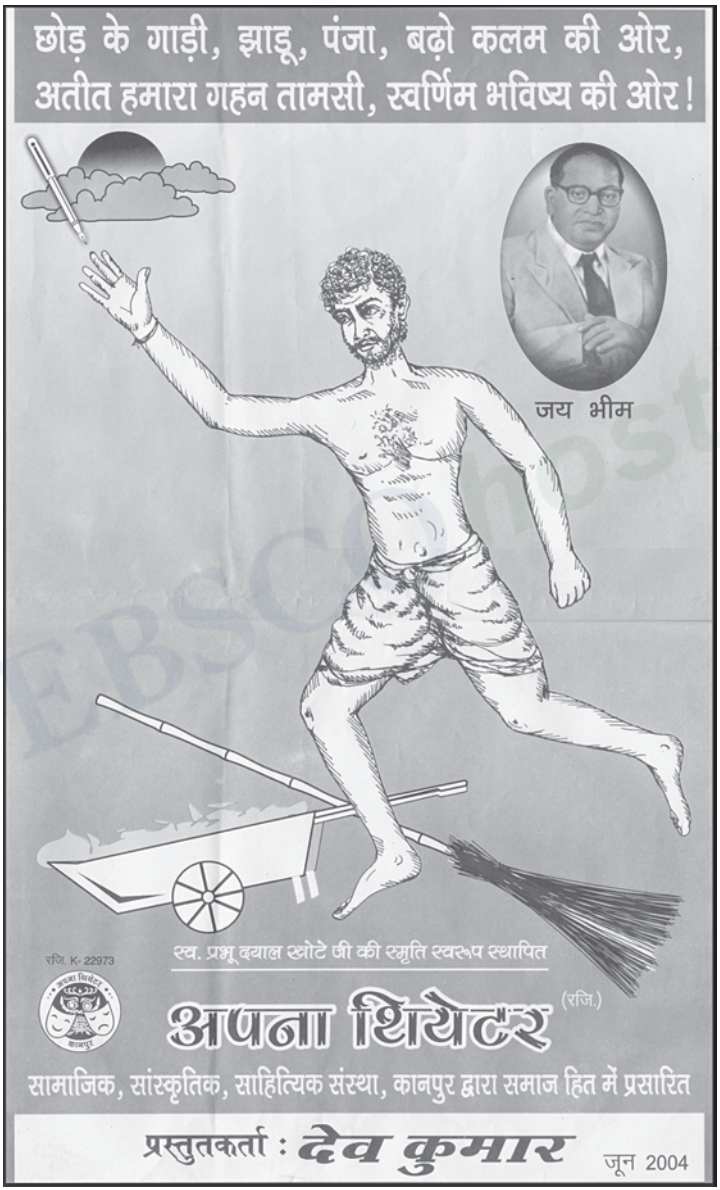
Figure 3.2
Poster of Apna Theatre, a Dalit theatre group active in and around Kanpur



Source: Dalit Resource Centre, G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad.

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Along with the Cultural Squad of the BSP many Dalit activist theatre groups also visit villages, districts and small towns of UP and present cultural performances in the form of theatre or *nautanki*s to arouse Dalit consciousness through cultural genres. These groups are active in the regions of Kanpur, Banaras, Allahabad, Lucknow, Bareli, Jhansi and so on.[23] Prominent among such theatres is the Apna Theatre active in Kanpur and other places within UP (see Figure 3.2). It was established by Dev Kumar, a social activist and also a writer of Dalit popular booklets on 14 April 1992. He was dedicated to arousing consciousness among the people of Dalit communities through the medium of this theatre. His first *natak* (drama), *Daastan* was based on ill deeds of the Aryans. His other plays include *Bhadra Angulimaal*, *Chakradhari*, *Sudarshan*, *Kapat*, *Agyat Etihaas* (based on the *veerangana* Udadevi Pasi), *Amar Shaheed Matadin Bhangi* and *Jamadaar Ka Kurta* and so on. Another theatre group by the name of 'Mandali' is popular in Banaras and among the other regions of eastern UP. This theatre group helps people in reliving their glorious past by singing praises of Dalit heroes and histories thereby generating a feeling of honour and pride for their respective castes. Many educated Dalits have also opened schools for Dalit children where cultural programmes are organized on national days like 26 January, 15 August and on important Dalit occasions especially on the birthday of Dr Ambedkar. In these functions, which are targeted towards the Dalit communities living there, children perform plays and dances, recite poems and sing songs narrating incidents of atrocities, injustice, oppression and exploitation to the people of these communities. They also narrate the glory of Dalit heroes, which helps to arouse a sense of pride and glory among the audience. The political message of the BSP is also transmitted through these functions.[24]

Visuals and Rituals

The translation of the heroes of the Dalits into the visual form has added many new elements in the culture of the people of that region. One of them is the emergence and development of rituals that are practiced at the time of celebrations to commemorate a particular hero. During functions organized to celebrate the birth or death anniversary of heroes like Jhalkarbai, Udadevi, Bijli Pasi and so on, secular activities like giving speeches, reciting poems, singing songs or performing dramas, are also accompanied by religious activities like lighting incense sticks, garlanding

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the statues with flowers, decorating them with vermillion and so on. *Mantra*s and chants narrating the glory of these heroes have also emerged and are strongly reminiscent of upper-caste hymns sung while offering prayers. In Jhansi, for example, regular worship (*puja*) is held before the statue of Jhalkaribai, which was installed by the BSP in front of the fort of Rani Laxmi Bai.[25] The sites of these statues are also the venue for poetic conferences where poets from many regions of UP are invited to recite poems invoking the glory of the heroes. In this manner, on the one hand, the statues and the sites around them provide both social and public spaces to Dalits for the expression of their identities, and on the other, they have also led to the creation of rituals and customs, which, while found in abundance among the upper castes, were very few in their communities.

Thus, useful for the political mobilization of Dalit communities, these visual images of these Dalit heroes have also led to the arousal of a strong sense of identity and self-respect among marginalized communities. They have also helped in creating awareness among non-Dalit castes with regard to lower-caste heroes, about which they knew very little, thus raising the prestige and status of these Dalit castes in their eyes.

Notes

1. Field visit to Lucknow and districts adjoining it like Mohanlalganj and Bahraich in April 2004.
2. Field visit to villages surrounding Lucknow on 13 March 2004.
3. Taken from a study done by Gopal Shukla. See Shukla 2003.
4. Field visit to Jittora, Bahraich in April 2004.
5. Field visit to Lucknow in April 2004.
6. Oral interview with O.P. Agrawal, aged seventy, Bahraich, on 24 April 2004.
7. Story narrated by Nasimuddin Siddiqui in an interview given to V.N. Rai, Ramanandsaraswati Pustakalaya, Azamgarh, 1997.
8. Based on oral interviews with respondents, Azamgarh, 19 May 2005.
9. Oral interview with Ram Sharan Ram, Azamgarh, on 5 May 2005.
10. Based on the interviews with Leelavati, Basantram, Vinod Kumar Bharati, Shivnath and other residents of villages Kotwa, Chaukukhurd, Bankat Bazaar, Janpad Azamgarh, on 19 July 2005.
11. *Hindustan*, 21 September 1998.
12. Oral interview with Omkar Singh, Azamgarh, 11 May 2005.
13. Oral interview with Ram Nagina Yadav, Azamgarh, 12 May 2005.
14. Oral interview with sculptor Surjit, Azamgarh, 19 July 2005.
15. Same as Note 9.
16. Oral interview with Sahodar Pasi, Azamgarh, 19 July 2005.
17. Hand written letter by Dr B.R. Ambedkar to Swami Achhutananda, Mathura, February 1932, preserved in the Dalit Resource Centre Archive, Allahabad.

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18. Interview with Lal Singh, an old RPI activist, Pratapgarh, 6 May 1995.
19. Interview with Bhawani Shankar, Kanpur, 3 June 2003.
20. Oral interview with Sukhdev Pasmangta collected in Barwaripur, 26 May 2005.
21. Oral interview with Babulal Bhanwra, Shahabpur, 26 January 2004.
22. Oral interview with Pyarelal, Shahabpur, 26 January 2004.
23. Field visits to different regions of UP during May to July 2005.
24. Field visit to Shahabpur, 26 January 2004.
25. Field visit to Jhansi, June 2005.

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Chapter 4

Identity Politics and New Historical Resources: Dalit Location in 1857 History

Those who have control over democracy also have control over history.

Dalit writer, S. Rao Sanjeevan Nath

The BSP has always been on the look out for new historical resources that can be added to its repertoire for creating a more influential language to expand its mass base and mobilize more and more communities. These new resources are then transformed into identity resources and disseminated to the people through various mediums, as discussed earlier. However in the process of dissemination, only certain types of heroes emerge as identity markers. These heroes form the master base of the BSP's resources out of which it selects those it considers appropriate for its political mobilization. As mentioned earlier, the 1857 Rebellion is the richest historical resource for the BSP. The heroes of this movement, as projected by the Dalits, are Balluram Mehtar, Udaiya Pasi, Chetram Jatav, Banke Chamar, Ganga Baksh, Beera Pasi, Makka Pasi, Matadin Bhangi. The women heroes of this movement are, among others, Jhalkaribai, Udadevi, Avantibai, Pannadhai and Mahaviridevi (Vidrohi 2004). These heroes form the master base of the BSP. It is noteworthy that the BSP did not find the heroes from other phases in the Indian freedom movement, like Madari Pasi who led the *Kisan Andolan* (Farmer's Rebellion) that took place in UP in 1914 (R.P. Saroj 1997: 27), or the Dalit matyrs of the Chauri Chaura incident (Vidrohi 2004: 176), significant enough to be developed as icons. The heroes picked up by BSP were initially used to mobilize the specific caste groups to which they belonged but gradually they were transformed into icons for the entire Dalit community. For example, when Jhalkaribai was being used for mobilizing

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the 'Kori' caste to which she belonged she was referred to as Jhalkaribai Kori. But later when her myth was being used to build up the image of Mayawati, she came to be known only as Jhalkaribai. Similarly, the caste names of Udadevi 'Pasi', Mahaviridevi 'Bhangi', Avantibai 'Lodhi' and Pannadhai 'Dhanuk' were dropped while linking their stories with Mayawati's. This, however, does not imply that the caste identity of Dalits was being homogenized into one Dalit identity. Rather, while a broader Dalit identity was being forged through electoral mobilization by the BSP under one political umbrella, their caste identity was also simultaneously being strengthened through the stories of their caste heroes.

The political strategy of the BSP is to tell and retell the stories of the heroes, build memorials and to repeatedly organize celebrations around their stories so that they may be etched into the collective psyche of the people. The stories are narrated in a manner that would ensure that the Dalits are able to imagine the story of the making of this nation in which they claim to have played a significant role. Several books like *Swatantrata Sangram Mein Achhuton Ka Yogdan* (Dinkar 1990), *Jhoothi Azadi* (Madan 1987), *Pasi Samaj Ka Swatantrata Sangram Mein Yogdan* (Pasi 1998), *Dalit Dastavej* (Vidrohi 2004) and so on, document the contributions of various Dalit heroes in different phases of India's freedom struggle. The significance of the sacrifices made by their ancestors are reasserted by saying that despite their sacrifices, the desires, dreams and aspirations for the nation-state are yet to be fulfilled. These narratives help them to claim a respectable place in the contemporary process of nation building and a lion's share in State-sponsored development projects and other democratic benefits. By repeatedly narrating their role in the nation making process, the marginalized communities put forward a moral logic in favour of reservations and social justice for themselves. They contend that despite the blood and sweat that they had shed for the building of this nation and their historical role in its development, the State has not helped them to recover from their social, cultural and economic losses. Through these narratives they assert that their role in the recorded history of nation making has not been sufficiently acknowledged and their contribution in the freedom struggle has been completely ignored (Dinkar 1990: 23). The narratives of the 1857 Rebellion helped them not only to establish their own heroes, but also to dethrone the existing higher-caste heroes from the mainstream narratives. In their narratives, they presented the high castes as traitors, conspirators and communities which were dishonest to their motherland. The Dalits also attempted to prove that by capturing history, these traitors now appear as most nationalist.

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They have become the most influential sections after independence (Vidrohi 2004: 86). The Dalits thus feel that there are sufficient grounds to explore *their* contribution to the freedom struggle and gain compensation for it in the present.

Over the last few decades, affirmative action by the State has produced some powerful leaders from the Dalit and low caste communities at many different levels of public–political life in the country. This has directly impacted on the politics of historiography in India, leading to the deconstruction of the legitimacy of history and its dominant methodologies. The effect of this has been the democratization of history as knowledge of the communities, which ultimately leads to the larger goal of democratization of history as a discipline. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2003), in his paradigm shifting article on the changing methodologies and epistemology of history, mentions that history as a formal discipline was introduced to the Indians during the British rule. At that time, historical evidence and ideas of truth and reality were central to the discipline. In the post-colonial period too, history as a discipline has remained anchored in this idea of evidence. But with developments in Indian democracy and the changing political arena in which Dalits and subalterns have become the principal actors, the distinction between a myth and a verifiable fact is becoming blurred. The modes of reasoning taught in the courses on social theory in universities are not necessarily obvious to citizens from the subaltern classes who now actively shape the character of Indian democracy. Chakrabarty identifies that there is an obvious paradigm shift in which the history as proposed by subalterns and Dalits, which is grossly different from professional academic history, is actively and consciously redefining the boundaries of history as knowledge.

In the changing socio-political milieu of Indian democracy, projects of inventing and reinventing the past are being undertaken by many marginalized communities to support their demand for an appropriate share in the power structure of state and society. The social and historical meaning of the past is being recreated and in this process, the past becomes the subject of present reflection and reconstruction to change one's marginalized social position. Here, the past is not merely a bygone past. It is, instead, built into the present. In this condition, the past not only appears as the professional historian's past, which is claimed to be 'rational history' based on empirical and positiv-istic notions of the past (Davies 2003: 5). It also appears as the past that helps the Dalits in their ongoing struggle for carving their future against the oppressive present. This past is the living history of these communities, which they may have experienced

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in reality or cognitively, and helps them to forge connectivity with their own selves (Hoy 1985). The structures of power that condition the knowledge and the writing of history are deconstructed in a way that presents a critique to the nation-state through Dalit narratives of nationalism, and puts forward their identities and differences for an appropriate share in power and in development. New histories are also being generated as knowledge base and resources for their democratic struggle for a better quality of life. This reflects a criticism raised by the communities who have not been fully co-opted in history and power, and in the democratic processes and development schemes run by the Indian nation-state. Foucault observed a similar process in the relationship between co-option, social resistance and social development (Foucault 1974: 367). This phenomenon is widely observed in UP, Bihar and Maharashtra and is a recently growing tendency in Madhya Pradesh, Delhi and Haryana. It may also be prevailing in other Indian states where Dalit empowerment is on the agenda.

In this agenda the past has been an integral and constitutive element of identity assertion and also a medium for coping with the oppressive present. There has also been a strong urge and need to link these narratives about the past with the story of the making of the nation for Dalits in the contemporary socio-political context. These narratives describing the role of the lower castes in the making of the modern nation are being popularized through booklets and prints composed by these communities themselves, and also through the political discourses of activists and leaders belonging to the literate section of Dalit communities. These then percolate down to the illiterate section through various modes of transmission, as has been discussed in the previous chapter.

In the political scenario that has emerged in the wake of the BSP, many castes that earlier had violent and contesting relations, are now redefining their identities to come close to each other and forge a unity. This can be seen in the case of two major Dalit castes in UP namely the Chamars and the Pasis who have always had an antagonistic relationship. Historically, the Pasis were the watchmen and stick wielders (*lathail*) of feudal landlords. This often forced them to beat up the Chamars at the behest of their masters. This had made the two castes traditionally enemies of the other.[1] But today in the new political environment created by the BSP, which is compelling the Pasis and the Chamars to come together under the same political umbrella, the Pasis claim that if they had not beaten the Chamars, the upper castes would have themselves beaten them, which would have been worse. The sticks of the Pasis thus saved the

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